Ex-PM Johnson hits back at 'incoherent' UK Covid report

LONDON: Britain's former prime minister Boris Johnson slammed an inquiry report critical of his government's response to the Covid-19 pandemic as "hopelessly incoherent" in a social media post Saturday.

"More than three years after the end of the pandemic, they are still wrangling about what went wrong," Johnson, 61, also wrote in an article for the Daily Mail tabloid, days after the inquiry slammed his government for its "chaotic" response to the global pandemic costing thousands of lives.

The inquiry led by retired senior judge Heather Hallett said Johnson's government "lacked" urgency in the early days of the health emergency, and that the first national lockdown came "too late".

The UK, which went into lockdown later than most other European countries, suffered one of the worst Covid-19 death tolls in Europe, recording more than 128,500 fatalities by mid-July 2021.

UK families who lost their loved ones during the pandemic on Friday called for all privileges given to Johnson as a former prime minister to be removed.

Covid-19 Bereaved Families for Justice UK accused Johnson of "one of the gravest betrayals of the British public in modern history". "I repeat that I remain full of regret for the things the government I led got wrong and full of sympathy for all those who suffered — whether from the disease or from the steps we took to protect the population," Johnson wrote in the article published late Friday.

"All I can say is that everyone involved was doing our level best, under pretty difficult circumstances, to get it right and to save lives," added Johnson, who commissioned the independent inquiry in 2021 when he was still leader.

However, he criticised the second report published by the inquiry on Thursday as "muddled" and "incoherent", including for its position on lockdowns as being both devastating and necessary.

He also said it "failed" to answer two questions about the pandemic: "where did the virus come from — and were the lockdowns worth the terrible price we paid?" He added that imposing restrictions before the government did at the end of March 2020, "would have been to contradict the scientific advice we were getting."

"Namely that you had to make sure that you did not go too early because of the risk of exhausting public patience with the restrictions," the former leader wrote.—AFP

ROME: Women hold smoke bombs in front of the Basilica di Santa Maria Maggiore (Basilica of Saint Mary Major) as demonstrators take part in a protest to mark the International Day for the Elimination of Violence against Women.—Reuters

Aftershocks rock B'desh as quake toll rises to 10

DHAKA: Two minor tremors hit Bangladesh on Saturday, a day after a powerful earthquake struck outside the capital Dhaka and killed 10 people.

A 3.3-magnitude jolt was recorded in Narshingdi district, east of Dhaka, in the morning, followed by a 4.3-magnitude quake that struck the capital in the evening, according to the Bangladesh Meteorological Department.

Dhaka resident Tasnuba Sharmin Sharna, 32, said her children started screaming as the furniture in their apartment began shaking.

"We are praying to God for mercy," Sharna said.

Friday's deadly earthquake was felt in Dhaka and neighbouring districts, causing widespread destruction.

Updating earlier tolls from the 5.5-magnitude quake, a disaster management official said "the number of casualties has reached 10, while a few hundreds were injured".

Saturday's aftershocks have added to fears of an even greater disaster.

"I don't feel safe yet, as there was another jolt this morning... Maybe we are next," said Shahnaj Parvin, 44, who lives near the epicentre of Friday's earthquake. She said she had never experienced such a tremor.

Cracks have developed in dozens of houses in her area, she said.

"I was hanging my children's clothes on the washing line when the tremor struck," added Parvin.

"I held onto a mahogany tree, and when I returned home, I found my glassware broken."

The government has activated Bangladesh's emergency operation centre to assess the scale of the damage and to coordinate relief and rescue operations.

Rubayet Kabir, an official of the Meteorological Department, said Bangladesh's geography makes the country of 170 million people prone to quakes.

"That's why we experience earthquakes quite frequently, though they are not as strong as the one" on Friday, he said.

"Some small tremors are expected after any major earthquake," Kabir said.

"There has been no massive earthquake in the last 100 years or more, but Bangladesh has been vulnerable for quite some time."—AFP

Diana's personal designer Costelloe dies at 80

DUBLIN: Irish fashion designer Paul Costelloe, personal designer to the late Princess Diana who became a fixture at London Fashion Week for four decades, has died aged 80, his family said in a statement on Saturday.

Costelloe was appointed as Diana's personal designer in 1983, shortly after establishing his own label, Paul Costelloe Collections, and their collaboration continued until her death in a car crash in Paris in 1997.

Costelloe, who led the development of all his collections from his studio in central London, was invited to show at the city's premier catwalk event in its inaugural year in 1984 and was there in September to present his latest spring-summer creations.

Costelloe died peacefully surrounded by his wife and seven children in London following a short illness, the family said.

Costelloe was born in Dublin in 1945, where he initially trained before moving to Paris's revered Chambre Syndicale de la Haute Couture and then to another fashion capital, Milan, where he was designer for the luxury department store La Rinascente. He spent some time in New York where he established his own label before settling in London, where his partnership with Princess Diana flourished. His collections today include womenswear, menswear, bags, homeware and jewellery.

"Paul led a remarkable life as a leading figure in Irish, UK and international fashion and business for decades. He built a hugely successful business through incredible talent, discipline."—Reuters

Over 300 taken from Nigerian school in mass abduction

MAIDUGURI: More than 300 children and staff were abducted from a Catholic school in Nigeria this week, one of the worst mass kidnappings ever recorded there.

The Christian Association of Nigeria (CAN) said on Saturday it had raised its estimate of those taken from St Mary's School in Niger state on Friday to 315 from an earlier estimate of 227 following a "verification exercise".

"This now makes it 303 students (and) — 12 teachers, bringing the total number of abducted persons to 315," it said in a statement, adding the new figure included 88 students who had been captured as they tried to escape.

The kidnapping comes amid a surge of attacks by armed groups in Nigeria, which has been under heightened scrutiny since US President Donald Trump threatened military action this month over the "treatment of Christians".

If confirmed, the revised number of people taken at the school would exceed the 276 schoolgirls abducted by Boko Haram in Chibok in 2014.

The Niger state government said on Friday the school had ignored an instruction that boarding schools should be closed because of intelligence indicating a high chance of attacks.

But Reverend Bulus Dauwa Yohanna, the CAN chairman, said no such warning had been issued after travelling to the school on Friday night.

"We are working with the government and security agencies to see that our children are rescued and brought back safely," he said.

The central government has ordered nearly 50 federal colleges to close and public schools in some states have also been shut.

Friday's mass kidnapping was the third such incident in Nigeria this week alone. On Monday, 25 schoolgirls were taken from a boarding school in Kebbi state, while on Wednesday 38 worshippers were taken by gunmen in an attack in Kwara state.

A US State Department official said on Thursday Washington was considering actions such as sanctions and Pentagon engagement on counter-terrorism as part of a plan to compel the Nigerian government to "better protect Christian communities".

Nigeria says claims that Christians face persecution misrepresent a complex security situation and do not take into account efforts to safeguard religious freedom.—Reuters

Indian trade unions plan protests against labour law

MUMBAI: Ten large Indian trade unions condemned the government's rollout of new labour codes Friday, calling the biggest such overhaul in decades a "deceptive fraud" against workers.

The unions, aligned with parties opposing Prime Minister Narendra Modi, demanded in a statement late on Friday that the laws be withdrawn ahead of nationwide protests they plan to hold on Wednesday.

Modi's government implemented the four labour codes, approved by parliament five years ago, as it seeks to simplify work rules — some dating to British colonial rule — and liberalise conditions for investment.

While the government says the changes improve worker protections by offering social security and minimum-wage benefits, the codes also allow companies to hire and fire workers more easily.

The rules allow longer factory shifts and night work for women. Furthermore, they raise the threshold for firms that need prior approval for layoffs to 300 workers from 100, giving companies greater flexibility in workforce management.

One of the trade unions, the Centre of Indian Trade Unions, organised protest marches on Saturday in the city of Bhubaneswar, where hundreds of workers gathered and burned copies of the new labour codes. —Reuters

Fake AI Trump audio clip on 'Epstein files' gains traction

WASHINGTON: Social media users have amplified an AI-generated audio clip purporting to show President Donald Trump screaming at US officials to block the release of documents related to disgraced financier Jeffrey Epstein, researchers said on Friday.

In recent weeks, renewed public furore over the so-called Epstein files has consumed US politics, spurring a showdown between lawmakers and Trump, a former friend of the late convicted sex offender.

"Not releasing the Epstein files," a Trump-like synthetic voice said in a widely circulated clip that social media posts falsely claimed showed the president berating his cabinet. "If I go down, I will bring all of you down with me."

The clip was amplified by posts on platforms such as *Instagram* and *TikTok*, many of which garnered millions of views and thousands of comments.

Disinformation watchdog NewsGuard said the audio was "an AI-generated fake", The clip, apparently first posted by a liberal *TikTok* user, came from a video showing signs it was generated with *Sora*, OpenAI's text-to-video model, NewsGuard said.

The clip was then shared in multiple other videos that lacked Sora's watermarks, thereby "obscuring its AI origins", the watchdog said.

Liberal social media users have also wrongly quoted White House Press Secretary Karoline Leavitt as saying that recently released Epstein emails do not refer to the president.

"It is not President Trump who is in the Epstein emails. It is another person with the same name," read a post on *X* that credited the remark to Leavitt and amassed more than four million views.

The false claim also gained traction on *Instagram*.

Responding on one such post on *X* insisting that Leavitt had made the remark, a White House account on the platform said: "No ... she didn't. You are a weapons grade moron."

The warping of reality underscores how disinformation is peddled across both sides of the political aisle in a hyper-polarised country. The falsehoods stir information chaos on increasingly unmoderated social media sites that has made it harder for ordinary users to decipher fact from fiction.

Trump has insisted he has "nothing to do" with his one-time close friend Epstein. The Republican president signed into law on Wednesday a bill requiring his administration to release government documents on Epstein.—AFP

NEWSMAKERS

AHMEDABAD: Workers stitch hoodies in a garment manufacturing unit on the outskirts of Ahmedabad.—Reuters

A VIEW of the fire in forests at Chalus, a town on Iran's Caspian coast. The fire has been raging for several days.—AFP

BEIJING: A vendor looks at caramelised fruits on sale along a street near the Qianmen Gate.—Reuters

SHANGHAI: Belgian DJ artist Amelie Lens performs onstage during the first indoor showcase of electronic music festival, The Magic of Tomorrowland, at the Hero Dome.—AFP

Tehran seeks help to douse blaze threatening Unesco-listed forests

TEHRAN: Iran has requested foreign assistance in extinguishing a large fire that has ravaged Unesco World Heritage-listed forests in the north of the country for several days, local media reported on Saturday.

The Hyrcanian forests stretch for about 1,000 kilometres along the Iranian coast of the Caspian Sea and into neighbouring Azerbaijan. Unesco recognised the forests as a World Heritage Site in 2019, deeming them unique for both their age — between 25 and 50 million years old — and their varied biodiversity, as home to more than 3,200 species of plants.

A fire that broke out in the area in early November and was initially quelled reignited on November 15, Iran's official IRNA news agency reported.

Mohammad Jafar Ghaempanah, deputy to Iranian President Massoud Pezeshkian, wrote Friday on X that "faced with the impossibility of containing the fire", Iran had "requested urgent assistance from friendly countries".

"Two specialised water bomber planes, a helicopter, and eight people will be dispatched from Turkiye," Shina Ansari, head of the Iranian Environmental Protection Organisation, said on Saturday. "If necessary, we will also seek assistance from Russia," she added on state television. According to the Tasnim news agency, the fire was allegedly started by hunters in the rocky area of Elit in the province of Mazandaran, in northern Iran.

The country is currently facing one of its most severe droughts since records began six decades ago.

The director general of crisis management for Mazandaran province, Hossein Ali Mohammadi, described the operation to extinguish the fire as "one of the most complex in recent years". Unesco says on its website the Hyrcanian forests contain "a large number of rare and endemic tree species" and are home to "many relic and endangered plant species".— AFP

BRASILIA: Supporters of Brazil's President Luiz Inacio Lula da Silva hold a banner reading "Bolsonaro in jail" in front of police headquarters following the arrest of former president Jair Bolsonaro.—AFP